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Meaning-Making Among Intentionally Childless Women

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This paper is a summary of a qualitative research project that focused upon meaning-making processes as described by intentionally childless women. A grounded theory exploration, it involved semi-structured interviews with 30 cisgendered women aged 27–61 who chose childlessness early in life. Based on principles inherent to social constructivism and feminist theories, the subjective voices of the participants were analyzed as normative expressions of female identity. The main category that accompanied intentional childlessness was a *sense of freedom*. In addition, two additional thematic categories focused on ways the women view their contributions to their communities and experience belonging and a sense of meaning in the world. Some negative experiences associated with being intentionally childless were also reported. The majority of the women in this study noted that they feel no regret or have no second thoughts about their decision, while a third of the participants spontaneously noted that they experience their lives as superlative.

Keywords: *intentional childlessness, voluntary childlessness, childless, childfree, identity development, meaning-making*

I don't want anybody to define what it is to be a woman for me. In that . . . I want to be able to define for myself that. Because according to my [Mexican] culture I'm not a woman—I'm not a mother, I'm not married, I don't have any kids. So what am I? So the meaning is that I have to find myself as an individual and from there help other women to define for themselves in their living community. But first [me] as an individual.

—Aurora, 41 years old

The purpose of the results described in this paper is to illustrate the meaning-making processes of intentionally childless women. These findings were originally part of a wider grounded theory study (Brooks, 2007) that explored intentional childlessness to conceptualize how, why, and when women make the decision to forego motherhood, and the ramifications of this choice over the adult lifespan.

For 40 years, psychological, sociological, and popular literature has reported on the phenomenon of dropping birth rates in many countries, including the United States. U.S. fertility rates have fluctuated, with a downward trend since the 1950s, to a

current rate below “replacement,” or an average of 1,862.5 births per 1,000 women (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Matthews, 2017). “The demographic shift toward increasing childlessness reflects a variety of social trends; these include access to contraception and abortion, women’s increased opportunity for education and labor force participation, and changing attitudes toward mothering” (Kelly, 2009, pp. 157–158).

The English language does not have a term analogous to “mother” to signify an adult, sexually-active woman who does not have children. If non-mothers are named at all in the culture or in the professional literature of the social sciences, they are defined for that which they lack: children. Terms such as *childless* or *childfree* are most often utilized. The fields of psychology and women’s studies adopted the term *voluntary childlessness* (VC) in the early 1970s to differentiate consciously childless women from women who do not have children for other reasons, such as medical or biological infertility (Bram, 1984; Houseknecht, 1987; Nason & Paloma, 1976; Veevers, 1973). Morell’s (1994) alternative term *intentional childlessness* (IC) is a

nod to the consciousness of IC women; a quality of certainty in the act of making the choice not to have children that denotes a purpose or design of action that the term voluntary does not signify.

Additionally, as an attempted antidote to the consistent use of the term childless in the literature which, as Morell (1994) noted, reinforces the binary juxtaposition between mother and childless women, the term *nullipara* is used herein. Most specifically, I use the term *nullipara status* to express one aspect of female identity—that of choosing not to bear children. *Nullipara* is Latin for a woman who has never given birth—not never been pregnant—and thus allows for the non-pathological choice for a woman to terminate a pregnancy or to descriptively include those women who became pregnant, lost the fetus, and then decided not to become pregnant again. Throughout the remainder of the text, combinations of the terms *intentional childlessness* and *nullipara* will be used. An important criteria for defining childlessness in the context of this research is that inclusion criteria for participation in this study included women who have never carried a child to term or raised a child in their own household (adopted, step-child, foster, or family member). This criteria was set to recruit women who have chosen to live their adult lives outside of the context of having and raising children.

In the current American milieu of declining birth rates and a perceived rise in childlessness, a modern conceptualization of a culture of *pronatalism* has arisen (Daniluk, 1996; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Lisle, 1996; Meyers, 2001; Morell, 1994, 2000; Rich, Taket, Graham & Shelley, 2011). In short, this term describes a valuing of motherhood, childbearing, children, and defined social roles for women. Pronatalist discourse validates one identity for women (motherhood) over another (intentionally childless), and is often at the heart of contemporary literature and research about women's identity formation and reproductive choice. Thus, the position of non-mother is not simply the same as the position of "woman" or "sexually active woman" within such cultural context. To this end, language and the use of terminology describing this lived experience is not trivial, but a critical addition to the lexicon of gendered experience.

Review of the Literature

Over the past three decades a body of research on the IC phenomenon is developing (see Basten, 2009 and DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002 for broad overviews of the field). Studies have compared and contrasted this population with women who chose motherhood to explore identity development, quality of life, and lifestyle (Shober, 1993; Skutch, 2001; Spurling, 2001). Data gathered on the prevalence of IC in specific cultures indicated that birth rates in developing countries continue to rise, notably in the United States, Japan, and Germany (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Basten, 2009; Pearce, 2002; Thomas, 1995). Another focus of the literature included late-life ramifications of choosing to be childless (Alexander, Rubenstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1992; Connidis & McMullin, 1999; DeLyser, 2012; Jeffries & Konnert, 2002; Rubin-Terrado, 1994). Much of the mid-life and late-life research focused on life satisfaction, economic stability, elder care, and kin networks. Findings are mixed with regard to the health and wellbeing of elderly childless individuals. Some individuals fare well and report high levels of satisfaction while others report lack of resources upon which to rely or feelings of regret. Basten (2009) suggested that additional research into extended social and kin networks as well as consideration of locations of identity such as education, socioeconomic status, and geographic location would be necessary in future research to develop a more clear picture of the elderly childless experience. Much of the research on IC established norms of the experience as well as challenged the social stigma associated with childlessness. Specifically, Park (2002) explored how childless individuals managed the stigma of childlessness to maintain their social status. Like the majority of the research cited herein, qualitative research is prominent in both the professional and popular IC literature and allows women to speak for themselves (Cain, 2002; Gillespie, 2003; DeLyser, 2012; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994; Ratner, 2000).

Findings in an early study of the IC population included an additional division into two general categories: *early articulators* and *postponers* (Veevers, 1978). Early articulators decide early in life

never to have children. Postponers do not definitively rule out children but through life circumstances perpetually postpone childbearing—including career choices, economic factors, and perceived readiness to have children—and remain childless. Veevers (1978) and Houseknecht (1977) placed the differentiation between early articulators and postponers on whether the timing of the decision was made before or after marriage, rather than setting an age delimiter. However, placing marriage as a primary criterion may exclude important unmarried and intentionally single populations. Therefore, I adopted an alternative definition of Early Articulation (EA) —individuals who choose childlessness by the age of 30 (Offerle, 1985).

Method

Two overarching theoretical paradigms influence the perspective and scope of the research at hand: feminism and social construction. Feminist psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers represent, explicate, and, most especially, de-pathologize the experiences of women (Brown & Ballou, 1992; Jagger & Bordo, 1989; Kesselman, McNair, & Schneidewind, 2002). Within this paradigmatic schema, emphasis is placed on lived experience and the subjective voice of participants.

In keeping with the philosophical worldview described above, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was the applied research method. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method which posits that “one does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). The process of grounded theory includes cycles of interacting with the collected data, extrapolating conceptual categories, and formulating theoretical constructs. Glaser and Strauss (1967/2000) emphasized that

the strategy of comparative analysis for generating theory puts a high emphasis on *theory as process*; that is, theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product. . . . Theory as process . . . renders quite well the reality of social interaction and its structural context. (p. 32, emphasis in the original)

The originators of grounded theory held strong positivistic views in relation to proper research method. However, Charmaz (2014) challenged this traditional philosophical pose:

The constructivist approach perspective shreds notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert. Not only does that mean that researchers must examine rather than erase how their privileges and preconceptions may shape the analysis, but it also means that their values shape the very facts that they can identify. (p. 13)

As an insider to the population studied, the constructivist framework gave me insight and permission to recognize my own subjectivity as operant in the formulation of the findings and theories proposed in this report.

Procedures

Thirty-one cisgender women, ranging in age from 27 to 61, qualified for all criteria and participated in semi-structured interviews, each ranging from one to two hours. Two recorded interviews were damaged, requiring follow-up sessions with these participants. One participant was easily reached, and an additional interview was completed. Repeated attempts to conduct a follow-up interview with the other participant proved unsuccessful. This incomplete data set was removed entirely from the findings. All results reported below are based upon the remaining 30 participants in the study. The majority of the women in the participant pool were White (94%), well-educated (95% Bachelor's degree or above), a-religious (57%), and heterosexual (80%). The homogeneity of the participant pool was greater than hoped for at the outset of the study and suggests future research implications, addressed in the discussion.

Each participant was interviewed individually by the researcher. The interviews were recorded with permission of the participant. The researcher transcribed all interviews using voice recognition software to produce written texts; this process proved illuminating in and of itself, and has been described elsewhere as the technique *embodied transcription* (Brooks, 2010).

Open coding, or the process of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and

categorizing" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61) the field of interest, was performed on the data collected. In conjunction with this over-arching process, secondary and tertiary processes of coding were also utilized to (a) "make connections between categories" (*axial coding*); and (b) "select the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (*selective coding*; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 96, 116). These processes did not happen in linear succession, but involved cycles of coding that facilitated the development of a mid-range theory of meaning-making among intentionally childless women.

The Meanings of Early Articulation

Over the development of an intentionally childless identity, women encounter both internal and external stressors that impact their ability to maintain their choice over time. An outcome of choosing early to remain childless is represented here by the construct Meanings of Early Articulation (MEA), evident across the pool of participants selected for this study (see Figure 1). MEA features a central, dominant theme, a Sense of Freedom, which includes the Importance of Autonomy, Control of Environment, and Economic Security. Two additional themes were Stewardship and Contributions, and Negative Experiences. From the data collected, it was clear that the reasons for choosing and affirming nullipara status take on importance as soon as a woman's choice has been made. However, the data also suggest that the articulation of these reasons seem to become increasingly clear as the women mature into middle and later adulthood. Ages of the women at the time of data collection are included below after each quotation to highlight this finding.

A Sense of Freedom. The overarching and most frequently noted theme that framed participants' experience of childlessness was a Sense of Freedom. Twenty-three participants specifically used the word "freedom" to describe either the meaning of their choice or a benefit of having made the choice not to have children. Sense of Freedom included the sub-themes: Importance of Autonomy (also described by 23 participants)—the ability to make choices based solely upon one's own desires (or those of one's self and a partner)—Control of Environment (described

by 14 participants)—the ability to choose when, where, and how one interacts in the world at any given moment—and Economic Security (described by 12 participants) —the importance of additional expendable income.

Each interview began with a creative expression exercise designed to invite nonverbal and visual features of the participant's experience into the process. Alex, 44, drew an image representing the luxury of Freedom (See Fig. 2).

I guess the image that came to mind for me was a sense of freedom and a sense of possibility that I have in my life that I would not have had, I believe, if I had had children. So the idea of floating, the idea of . . . being above the earth, as kind of more of a floating ability—to float more in life, which is something I really appreciate having the luxury of being able to do.

Cynthia, 39, recognized that freedom is a critical element in her life and highlighted it in her opening drawing as well (see Fig. 3).

I think that's a lot of why I didn't have kids because I get to do what I want . . . I got to go to Nashville and pursue music for a few years. And then I got to go to graduate school when I wanted to. And I got to go to the Peace Corps. And I got to go to Africa, and I got to travel around the world. And I got to go to Alaska and kayak when I wanted. And I was able to move to California if I felt like it. . . . It's definitely—"freedom" is the word for, I think, my decision. Freedom.

Hockey Queen, 39, a dietitian by profession, had a distinct sense of humor about her decision to remain childless. She quips that she "eats cereal most nights" because she is free to do as she pleases. This small freedom was recounted with joy and pride. She used the term "totally self-centered" to describe her day-to-day life, but this was not said with shame, rather with a sense that she has created the life that she wanted for herself.

Of the 23 women who valued the Importance of Autonomy, 12 women expressed this quality as the ability to travel often. Taking wilderness adventures and expressing pride in her self-sufficiency and outdoor proficiencies Cimarron's, 61, notes:

I travel close to the ground and I've been in dangerous situations. I like to go into the wilderness. I'm a great camper. I'm a good shot with a gun. I can start a fire. I can cook outdoors. The things I've done, I wouldn't want a kid with me. And in fact some of the guided trips that I've taken, kids aren't allowed, because it's too dangerous. . . . So you know those kinds of things make me grateful.

With regard to Control of Environment, Iris, 35, expressed how living an independent life as an adult was the antidote to an "annoying" childhood. Being in charge of her life is a source of pleasure and gratitude:

I don't feel like I've got something missing. . . . I've got people I can talk to, but I can choose or not choose to be with them. And I can choose or not choose to talk to them. And I like that. . . . That is the best thing for me about adulthood, especially, I think, because my childhood was so incredibly annoying . . . is the choice of who to welcome into my life and on what terms and when . . . I love that so much! I love never having somebody . . . forced upon me. And, so, you know, I think my decision not to have children is just affirmed by how great my life is and that I don't have . . . something making demands on me and limiting my choices.

Shelley, 35, indicated pride in her ability to buy her own condominium, suggesting that Economic Security is of value to her. Home ownership was one example of this construct. In addition, Economic Security was tied to disposable income and, in many cases, acknowledgement and pleasure that the participants, as individuals or partnered in a couple, had full ownership of their resources without the expense involved in raising children. Michelle, 40, in discussing Economic Security indicated virtually all of the aspects of a Sense of Freedom:

I'm able to become the kind of professional I've wanted to become. I'm good at my job and I get a high salary. My husband makes a high salary. We have a nice house that I enjoy very much.

I'm able to pursue my sewing and my cooking and my gardening—the things that I really enjoy—and interacting with people online. I get to do these things that I want to do. And when I was growing up there were times when we were poor and/or isolated from other members of the community. . . . And so I really felt those shackles. . . . Remembering that with my life now I'm very grateful for what I'm able to do with my life. And I'm able to turn off my cell phone when I want and I'm able to control . . . it's a control thing. I'm able to control the kinds of interactions that I have and for the most part what I do with my time. And all of that is very pleasing to me. I'm able to think a lot. I'm able to observe. I'm able to travel. . . . So I'm very happy with the way that my life is right now.

Stewardship and Contributions

Additional positive outcomes include "being true to one's self," as Lee, 42, described it, or "empowerment," which, for Aurora included a call to serve other women and "help other women" who are considering making the same choice in their own lives. Themes of Stewardship and Contributions, expressed as motivation toward giving back to their communities and the world-at-large, were intrinsic aspects of being a nullipara for 15 of the participants. Three sub-themes—Global Interconnectivity, Re-vision of the Mothering Metaphor, and Alternative Existential Perspectives—are ways in which each woman connects herself to the world and generates personal meaning of her relationships and life purpose. Beni, 31, represented Global Interconnectivity in her drawing (See Fig. 4). This sub-theme is related to participants viewing their contributions in work and service as beyond the scope of individuals, the construct of family, or even local influence, but, rather, experiencing a sense of serving a greater good in global contexts.

Dawn, 52, valued Global Interconnectivity and also described a Re-vision of the Mothering Metaphor to affirm the relationship between not having children and dedicating her life to others:

Well it's always been in my consciousness from that point, when I was young. With that

knowingness. . . . And I haven't really vacillated and gone back and forth with, "Oh, do I want to have children or do I not?" I've been crystal clear throughout my life that that was never going to be part of this lifetime for me. . . . Strangely enough even as a child it's something that I've held, I guess, is just being of service. It wasn't to be serving, like, an individual or a child. It was a much bigger picture for me. . . . I guess

. . . And I think I have a lot of the nurturing — or what I would call mothering — I would call nurturing rather than mothering characteristics, even though I don't have children. —Valerie, 48

An additional 5 women also expressed a desire to be of service or contribute to the world through their life's work and volunteerism without equating these acts with mothering. As Rosebud, 36, noted, "probably that passion that a lot of women have going into raising a family goes into my work and my volunteer work." Whether utilizing the metaphoric language of maternal behavior or "mothering" or not, the drive to be in connection with others, cultivate strong relationships, and be of service was expressed across the pool of participants.

Interestingly, religion did not play a major role in the early lives of the women who participated in this study. Even in adulthood, the majority of the participants did not adhere to any organized religious tradition. However, indications of interest in spirituality, expressions of how these women have constructed meaning in their adult lives, and how they interpret their own drive toward service to others are illustrative of Alternative Existential Perspectives. Beni, 31, recognized that, aside from having children, there are alternative ways to contribute to the world and leave a legacy:

I just feel that there are so many other ways to [defend against our own mortality]. I feel like by doing political organizing in the world, and . . . doing . . . other work that requires compassion and nurturance in the world . . . we impact the world and we influence people and we share our values and reproduce our values.

Carol Q., 48, evoked the work of early gay and lesbian activists and theorists who wrote the contributions of homosexual men and women into American culture and drew parallels to the experiences of nullipara women:

Judy Grahn and Harry Hay . . . came separately to similar conclusions culturally . . . that queer people come into the world generation after generation in all kinds of cultures to be a



Figure 4. Beni's representation of stewardship and contributions.

my contribution was to be more global, and not to be individualized. Not that people don't do both, but that's just—it's not my path. . . . I hold mother energy, but it's towards the business that I've chosen, and serving other people. . . . I would call myself "mother," but it's not to my own child. It's to serving humanity, wanting to awaken consciousness.

Nine women placed the nurturing qualities inherent to their contributions to the world within a maternal context when they described their place in society.

I've done my nurturing, which is important to me, because it is who I am, by being a nurse. . . . I tend to give total commitment to one or two things. And then I can really do a good job.

repository of a different kind — of a different part of the culture. . . . And I actually think you could say this about intentionally childless people as well . . . that there's a way in which most of us, whether we have clearly to do with teaching, clearly to do with speaking to kids, whether that's an overt part of the work that we choose, or whether it comes to us sort of on the side. . . . There's a way in which people without children can devote ourselves to a different kind of work, or work in a different way—work at a different level of intensity.

These two examples illustrate a linking of choosing to remain childless and creating meaningful work to the culture at large. The above illustrations suggest a desire to create a legacy—to leave something behind in the world other than children. Along with the women cited above, 4 other women made direct links between service in the world and choosing not to mother that suggested that their work in the world was a meaning-making endeavor in their lives.

Eight other women also expressed Alternative Existential Perspectives, but their sentiments tended toward a personal interpretation of spirituality in their adult lives rather than cultural or collective meanings. These women expressed ways in which they have created meaning or experienced spirituality in ways different from childhood religious upbringing (or the absence thereof). Four of these women cited an introduction to goddess traditions such as paganism with creating a sense of personal empowerment that has contributed to her sense of purpose and meaning. Three women noted a devotion to caring for the earth and ecological matters, and 1 woman has found spiritual support in a traditional monotheistic tradition. Like those who create direct links to service to others, these women's expressions of Alternative Existential Perspectives contribute to how they view their place in the world and the meaning of their experiences.

Negative Outcomes

Overall, MEA includes strong positive outcomes for the participants. However, 2 main negative outcomes were reported by participants: Otherness in Community and Difficulty or Loss

in Friendships with Parenting Women. A sense of Otherness in Community was described by 18 of the participants. This Otherness took the form of feeling difference or outsider status.

During the time Lee, 42, was considering the decision to forego motherhood, she felt this Otherness even in interactions with her extended family. As a remedy to her outsider experience, she sought out an intentional family, consisting of friends, in which she did not feel so "other."

My stepsister had her first child when she was 25 or 26. My sister got married around the same time and was trying to have children. . . . And they knew I was married, and they knew [my former husband], and they would always ask me, "When are you going to have children?" And I would get really uncomfortable. And I would not say, "Never." I would say, "I don't know. Not yet. It's too soon." And they would say, "No. Not too soon. You should." It was just—I was so uncomfortable, and I felt so out of place. . . . You'd think that that would be something that would make you feel comfortable and secure—having an extended family—And it wasn't...I just never felt as comfortable in that...just in that atmosphere as I do with this new family that I have—which is all friends... It's just...that feels much more like a family to me.

Iris, 35, spoke about her religious conversion in adulthood and her experience within a traditional Protestant religion. While she credits her conversion with giving her emotional and psychological strength, her nullipara status actually has had negative impact on her life among her congregation.

What I hear regularly in church is, "It is okay to be who you are." And so that dovetails in with the "it is okay for me to choose to be childless, because I am okay as I am." Now my faith tells me that, and my spirituality tells me that. What I see in my congregation does not tell me that, because I am the underrepresented demographic, you know?...not sure they know what to do with me, because I don't fit into their demographics...I don't get invited to the family

stuff, and so basically they're telling me I am a non-valid entity whether they realize it or not... Which basically tells me that...there really is no place for me. That I don't fit . . . I don't plug into the dominant paradigm somewhere...and that frustrates me, but it's never been different, really, in any church of which I have been a member. I mean that's just the way it is. And that's just the way it is in society in general.

The experience of otherness can also lead to Difficulty or Loss in Friendships with Parenting Women which was reported as a source of regret or sadness for 11 of the participants.

I've noticed that it affects my friendships I guess I start to lose what I have in common with my friends when they start having babies. And it frustrates me sometimes to be around my friends when they're with their kids, because sometimes they're so focused on their kids you can't even have a conversation with them. And that's irritating. So I think that's the main thing I've noticed that I don't like is that I don't feel like I've developed as many friends, because their world is about children, and my world is about still doing the same stuff that I was doing when I was 20—whatever I wanted. . . . —Cynthia, 39

Michelle, 40, expressed feeling judged by women who mother and noted uncertainty as to the source of this phenomenon. She suspects it may be related to awareness in others of the abundance of freedom she has in her adult life:

There is definitely a difference between me and the moms. And, you know, the moms love their kids. And I don't know whether it's a defense mechanism, because I have so much freedom and I can go out and do the things I want to do and I take advantage of that freedom. You know, I'm not pining for the children I didn't have. I'm enjoying it and. . . I don't know if they're feeling that they need to defend themselves, or if it's just the way that they feel. And I don't know where it's coming from.

What these women are describing is a social gulf between parenting and non-parenting women

that, for some, creates difficulty in maintaining relationship. "[Mothering women] don't make time for their women friends," reports Carol H., 43, who expressed sadness "because," as she said, "I had some really cool relationships." Among the 11 women who discussed the challenges in these friendships, each expressed an understanding regarding the need for parenting women to devote extended amounts of time to the care of their children but nonetheless also voiced the loss of those relationships.

Long-term Satisfaction With Choice

An overarching aspect, derived from the wider grounded theory study mentioned above, that informed the outcome of meaning-making processes for the participants is ongoing satisfaction with their choice over time (Brooks, 2007). Even with the presence of Negative Experiences, 11 women specifically self-reported feeling that their lives are surplative. Ten stated that they had no regrets regarding their choice, while 9 noted that they never had second thoughts regarding their choice. Overall, 21 of the participants specifically reported being happy to continue to maintain nullipara status and life satisfaction with regard to their choice. When asked about her current life situation, Hockey Queen, 39, called it "phenomenal." Ann, 46, said, "Both from a personal standpoint, and, let's say, financial standpoint. . . .I don't want to say satisfying—it was more than satisfying—it's just been great."

Past literature evaluating long-term experiences of voluntary childlessness generally have focused on regret or the challenges of aging for the nullipara woman (Alexander et al., 1992). In keeping with the findings of both Jeffries and Konnert (2002) and DeLyser (2012), the women in this study eschewed the concept of regret as an outcome of their decision. It was, in fact, striking to find that only 1 woman of the 30 participants reported concern of isolation or lack of care for herself as she ages. For the 11 women who mentioned possibly regretting their decision in the future, it was generally recognized that it might be a source of pleasure or security to have adult children later in life, but not a good-enough reason to have children. As Claire, 27, states:

Some of the topics that come up [are] the idea of the elderly population and they don't have any family and they're sort of left alone because their spouse or partner has passed on or what have you. And so it's moments like that when I'm like, "Gosh is this really a good idea? I don't know if I want to be in that situation." Like, if my husband passed away before me...but then I quickly follow it up with, "But that's not reason enough to have kids," is so that I can somehow guarantee that I'll have, like, a support group around me when I'm old.

Ann, 46, continues this line of thought:

Occasionally, you know, I might . . . I have a regret kind of like, "Huh, I wish" you know, "It would be nice to have children . . . that were older [laughing] . . . that were successful and interesting". . . I really don't have any regrets, I just find that that would have been, probably, one thing that was nice . . . but I just look at all the things that [my husband] and I have done in our life and I don't think we would have been able to pick up and leave and work internationally, which was a huge, huge phase in our life that has changed it dramatically. Um, we wouldn't have done that, I don't think, as easily with children.

Such considerations—recognizing that there are upsides and downsides to making the choice to maintain nullipara status once again reflects the consciousness with which the vast majority of women who participated in this study either made or maintained their individual decisions.

Discussion

Freedom is the central theme of early articulation of intentional childlessness, as it was the predominant rationale for maintaining choice over time. This finding is in keeping with the majority of results from earlier works that focused upon choosing to maintain nullipara status (Ireland, 1993; Mawson, 2005; Mollen Baker, 2003).

Prior research (Broneck, 2001; Mawson, 2005; Roy, 2000) supports one of the findings of this study: a lack of religious affiliation among the intentionally childless. These researchers suggested

that spirituality (differentiated from religion) is present in this population. From the pool of women interviewed in this study a strong sense of existential meaning was derived from IC. From the data collected, it is not possible to tie religion or spirituality to the decision of IC. Broneck (2001), in her study of voluntarily childless couples and spirituality, posed an interesting question that could be valuable for future research: "Which came first, the shift in religious practice or the decision to become childless?" (p. 43). While a-religiosity defined the majority of the women in this study, it is not possible to determine if there is a causal relationship to IC. It may be an artifact of regionality, or of another undetermined demographic.

Three potential areas for further research may shed light on where or whether spirituality, in one form or another, is related in any way to childless identity formation. First, the overwhelming lack of spiritual role models of non-mothering, sexually active, mature women in most religions may contribute to a distancing from traditional religious practice (Brooks, 2006). Second, religious privileging of the role of mother may be a cause of lack of religious connection for non-mothering women; if religious traditions are "telling" nullipara women that the appropriate role for them is to have children, are they not in conflict with religious doctrine? Third, as reported specifically by two of the women who have continued to participate in organized Christianity, the outsider status they both experience in traditional religious community is one negative aspect of maintaining nullipara status; this may also have contributed to a distancing from religious practice among the other participants. Research that would compare and contrast the experience, identity formation, and spirituality of nullipara women who consider themselves spiritual or religious and those who do not may shed additional light on these questions.

The participant pool recruited for the study was strongly homogenous with regard to race, education, and geographic locale: white, highly educated, and primarily living in Northern California. This highlights the importance of further research on intentional childlessness in diverse racial populations, because, as Tarver-Behring (1994)

made clear, the experience of White women is not the experience of all women. Thus, a question for further research remains unanswered by my study: Are there multiple privileges at play (race and class especially) that prevent women from, or enable women to, make this choice? And, even more generally, are there differences and/or similarities across culture and ethnicity in how, when, and why one chooses never to have children? Due to the lack of diversity in my own study, as well as in the majority of the literature, there is still no robust data available to answer these questions (Kelly, 2009). Due to anecdotal evidence found in the screening process of potential participants for this research, I speculate that there may be differences in the timing of when the choice to remain IC is made across race and culture that precluded me from interviewing those few women with whom I had contact for this study. In other words, women who came to the decision to remain childless later in life (after the age of 30) did not meet the inclusion criteria set for this particular research. In order to begin to develop a greater understanding of the roles of race and class for IC, specific data on women from diverse backgrounds must be collected in order to better develop IC theory.

Research and analysis on women's access to reproductive resources (health care, contraception, abortion, and education) is also of crucial import. The impact such access may have on reproductive choice and reproductive rights underscores the political importance of how and why certain women are free to make their own choice whether or not to have children (Thompson, 2006).

Intentionally childless women need to be included more explicitly in research on gender roles that includes studies on norm expectations, implications for deviance from stated norms, shifts in trends over time, and longitudinal studies (see Kelly, 2009; and Rich et al., 2011 for recent contributions furthering this conversation). Areas related to mothering that are also connected in some way to this material may enrich the spectrum of voices contributing to the psychology of women. Most specifically, studies on consciously choosing to mother that develop specific models and theories of the decision-making processes (see Park, 2005,

as an exemplar), studies about women who felt intentionally childless for much of their lives but ultimately chose to have children, as well as research about women who mother who do not adopt a "mothering" identity would also begin to bridge the dichotomous gap between mother/not-mother, could contribute toward a more holistic vision of the collective lived experience of women in America and beyond.

A reason to pursue further research is that there continues to be a lack, an absence, of language and imagery that adequately describe the unique female experience and/or identity of breaking with the traditional gender role of mothering. As noted throughout this work, but most importantly through the words of the participants themselves, this choice continues to be described by reference to a child: childless, childfree. The participants roundly reject these terms but have no other language available to them to describe their choice. No terms seem to make sense or feel "natural." The drive to create visibility of this experience is hampered by linguistic failures that continue to conflate women who choose not to mother with women who physically cannot mother (both are childless) and, ultimately with women who do mother (by utilizing terms like non-mother). Thus, the absence of non-dichotomous language and over-reliance on heteronormative, pronatalist ideals of appropriate roles for women (all demarcations of women as childless, childfree, non-mothering, non-mother, nullipara continue to remind us all of what we, as women, are *not* doing) perpetuates dynamics of power and legitimacy in our culture.

Research into the personal symbols that hold meaning for women who have made this choice, as well as the socio-cultural and religious symbols that are used to represent these women, may extend the conversation. This extension involves embracing expanded ways to speak-into-being and celebrate a class of women who feel righteous in their choice and grateful for the ability to exercise reproductive freedom. Their lived expression may, indeed, be the rise of IC role models for future generations of girls.

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